

The Two Worlds We Live In

This is an English translation of a Kannada essay “ನಮ್ಮೊಳಗಿನ ಎರಡು ಜಗತ್ತುಗಳು” (pp. 3-8) by S.N. Balagangadhara and Rajarama Hegde (in ಬೌದ್ಧಿಕ ದಾಸ್ಯದಲ್ಲಿ ಭಾರತ [*India in Intellectual Slavery*], 2015, Nilume publications).

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Let us consider the two worlds that *educated Indians* inhabit: the first is a traditional world that we belong to as we grow up. It is the world of our parents, relatives and neighbours, who teach us to go about in the world. They teach us a way of living that involves multiple practices and ways of thinking. Then there is a second world, to which we open up as we get educated. It is a world of ‘rational thoughts’. Our modern education introduces us to this world. This world that lies outside of the traditional world of our family, jati, rituals, and so on, is built on the foundations of these rational thoughts and ideas. Therefore, we come to think of it as an ideal model for us in (or of) the world.

In conjunction with this belief, this second world keeps imparting specific attitudes toward our traditional world. Consider these two attitudes, for instance: Indian society is based on the immoral and unethical caste system and for centuries women and lower castes have been oppressed here. That is, the second world inculcates in us an attitude that the traditional world where we grew up is defective, it should follow the world of ideas and correct itself and that it is an ardent duty of the educated person, who has become aware of the world of ideas, to amend and transform the traditional world.

Surprisingly, none of us in our childhood days grow up experiencing the traditional world as imperfect and flawed. We may experience various emotions there: pain, pleasure, despair, violence and so on. Nevertheless, this does not make us live our practices by thinking about them as corrupt, a result of our ancestors’ ignorance or as a sign of savagery. Our elders who have followed such practices earnestly too do not seem to have harboured such negative feelings towards them. The society that follows these practices has also taught us the distinctions of *punya-paapa*, *nyaya-anyaya*, *dharma-adharma* and so on. Besides these notions, we also undertake these practices because they contain some of the cherished moments of joy

¹ This translation was used as a reading text in some of the workshops conducted in SDM CIRHS between 2016-19 by Sufiya Pathan and Dunkin Jalki. Thanks to Dr. Sufiya Pathan for help in all aspects of translation of this text.

in our life. Such experiences are not part of the lost world of the olden days, but they coexist with the world of rational thoughts.

Several well-known Kannada writers have (and the writers from other Indian languages too must have) recorded such joyful days of their childhood. However, as soon as they are introduced to the other world, the world of rational thoughts, their experiences of the traditional world begin to reveal a different set of truths to them. They say that they came to these truths after reading some specific author or hearing someone speak. "Even though I lived in the traditional world, I never understood its problems. After reading some book or after listening to a such and such speaker, I realised the true nature of the world (its ignorance, tyranny, social ills) I was part of. Unless we annihilate its practices, we will not grow." This is how they speak. To enter the second world, thus, is to be enlightened: "earlier I was living in falsities, but I have now come to the truth".

Once this world of rational thoughts gets the better of us, we may react in different ways.

- (1) Many of us may not make a problem out of it and learn to straddle both worlds with ease.
- (2) Some people may get defensive about the traditional world. They may strive to use the conceptual language of the other world to show how the traditional world is not all doom and gloom but is deeply scientific in its way. They may also take the criticism of the traditional world from the other world seriously, feel apologetic about the traditional world and busy themselves with rectifying the traditional practices.
- (3) Yet some other people may partially or completely deny the traditional world. They may grudgingly take part in traditional practices. The joy one derives from being part of the traditional practices may now begin to elicit a feeling of guilt in some people. In turn, they may begin to either sympathise with or despise those who gladly take part in these practices. Some may even feel that to wage a war against these traditional practices and their followers is the duty of progressive-minded people. This often results in a relationship with society that is fraught with frictions.

In such cases, they attempt to consciously break free from the experiences of the traditional world. When such attempts fail, one often develops hypocrisy and pretension. They develop strategies such as defending the traditional practices by ascribing rationality to them or fleeing the world alone only to recount the attempt subsequently with a moral sigh, or pretending to like the practices for not wanting to hurt the feelings of their relatives. Kannada literature is full of such instances.

However, indifferent to this circus around it, the traditional world lives on. It neither loathes nor rejects the other world, but rather wears it as a feather in its cap and moves on. Therefore, it often looks as though it has changed, only to exhibit its vice-like grip the next moment. Activists trying to change this world give up in despair, compromise with it, practice pretension, become islands or get tamed and become part of the traditional world. "Well, no one can change our society, you see. Buddha tried, Basava and Gandhi tried..."

nothing changed! Nothing changes in India!” Such exclamations have become our truths today. Educated groups of every generation have come face to face with a stronger or weaker version of this experience. Indian society appears to these progressive activists as though it is caught up in a dogged refusal to change.

But see it from the perspective of society, and you will begin to see a different picture: the rational world refuses to take the experience of people as genuine and bases our understanding of the world on these experiences. Are we sure that many of our current problems are not an outcome of this refusal? The rational world is built out of the descriptions of India that are central to the way the West experienced India and from the questions they asked. When traditional India is described as superstitious, anti-human, anti-social, oppressive, discriminatory, feudal, and so on, we make use of Western concepts. These concepts have a specific meaning and history in Western culture. Either unaware of or with a disregard for the history and the meaning of these concepts, we haphazardly translate these words into our languages and describe our society.

An attempt to discuss the experience of Indians is suppressed as though it is a sin, an immoral act or a conspiracy of vested interests. We take the Western descriptions of India as the truth and re-order our experience in its light in a distorted way. This is *colonial consciousness*. It is ‘colonial consciousness’ because the colonised servants have inherited it from their masters. It stops us from thinking about the way we live.

That is, even though our childhood experience is true, the rational world assumes that it is born out of ignorance and therefore we cannot use it in thinking about our society. By implication then, to think about our society, we must inevitably discard our experience. Put differently, to study Indian society, we must inevitably ignore the way people live here. It is not my contention that this is a problem in itself. There is nothing wrong with ignoring the experience of people. It is our daily ‘experience’ that the sun revolves around the earth. Nevertheless, it is through education that we learn that the earth revolves around the sun. Similarly, there is no reason that things contradictory to our experience (the traditional life of Indians) that the rational world talks about are necessarily untrue.

We should not forget, however, that scientific truths are explained in a logical way such that our experience is not discarded but explained. Even though the earth revolves around the sun, science explains why we experience it differently. No one has yet scientifically explained any of the following questions to us: Why should we think of the society that has nurtured us and given us life as inhuman? Why should we think of our elders who have taught us to think and live as ignorant fools? Why should we now be remorseful about those moments that we once enjoyed? Why are those actions that we thought of as *punya* are immoral? Without offering any explanations, such ideas are thrust on us as self-evident truths.

The social sciences have defended these descriptions generated by colonial consciousness without giving any reasons. Discussions about Indian society over the last few centuries are

based on these social sciences. These social sciences were built to answer questions and problems that the West had. They are still playing the same role.

If the problems in society are indeed the problems of those who are part of it, we are faced with two questions. (1) Like people in every society have problems, Indians too must have their problems. If these problems need to be solved, we must understand the way people live (their experience) and its various aspects. Are we doing this? (2) How many of the so-called 'problems of Indians' or 'the Indian social problems', which we have been deliberating upon endlessly and yet have failed to solve, are genuine problems? If our answers to these questions, respectively, are a 'no' and a 'none' (or 'a few'), a third question arises: What are the consequences of these social science discussions that are an outcome of colonial consciousness?

We can answer this last question by referring to the discussions current among intellectuals in India today. Many of our standpoints, accepted standards and the concepts used in current discussions about Indian culture and society in the Indian academic world and media exemplify colonial consciousness. They are the biggest hurdles in our attempts to detect the real problems in our society. They talk about problems that do not even exist in India. Consequently, we cannot even discuss these problems in a way that resonates with our life. We cannot explain them to people in a way that makes sense to them. Solutions to these problems, therefore, are but a chimaera. Any solution today demands a better understanding of the real nature of the problems facing us. This requires that we undertake two tasks simultaneously: unearthing the problems that the colonial consciousness has created and analysing them critically.

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